

Testimony on SB 394 –To Expand types of elections that may be conducted by mail ballot

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Jean Curtiss, Missoula County Commissioner

On behalf of Missoula County I encourage you to support SB 394, a bill that would allow each county the option of running all of their elections, including federal and state elections, by mail ballot.

In Missoula County, the elections office has been running elections by mail ballot for many years, including fire district, school bond and municipal elections. We have never had the option under Montana law to run our federal or state elections in this manner. We would like that option.

With the ever growing number of absentee ballots requested and the complexity and cost of running elections, mail ballots may be a good choice for our state. In the 2008 presidential election in Missoula County, 54 percent of the ballots cast were voted absentee, not at a polling place. I understand that half of your committee are registered on the permanent absentee list so you understand the benefits and security of voting by mail.

If we used mail ballots for a state or federal election, we would provide sites throughout the county where you could drop off your ballot on or before Election Day. Drop off locations could include Lolo, Seeley Lake, Bonner, Frenchtown, Cold Springs, Paxson, Rattlesnake, Hellgate Elementary, Emma Dickenson (Adult Education Building) and the Courthouse.

We would provide machines called Automarks that assist disabled voters in voting their ballot independently at these drop off sites as well. A voter can also have a family member, friend or caregiver assist them with voting their ballot in the comfort of their home and then mail the ballot or take it to a drop site.

Here are some other advantages of voting by mail:

- Lower election administration costs. If mail ballot elections had been held in 2008, approximately \$4 million dollars of taxpayer money would have been saved statewide- about \$100,000 per election, in Missoula County alone.
- No waiting in line. For smaller communities this may not be an issue, but in larger communities as the increasing costs of elections force more counties to eliminate polling locations in favor of consolidation, this issue could hinder voting.
- No polling place intimidation. In many Montana counties law enforcement is often required to maintain order and many voters are very uncomfortable with the electioneering done 100 feet from the polling place.
- No confusion about where to go to vote. With consolidation and redistricting, polling places often change.
- No need to make arrangements for childcare or time off from work. This is a benefit to single mothers and lower income workers.

- No need to hire and train poll workers. Missoula County and Yellowstone County both recruit and train over 750 election judges, Ravalli County recruits and trains about 275 election judges. It is increasingly difficult to find enough individuals willing to work on Election Day. Missoula County will be able to carry out a mail ballot election for state and federal races with 100 people while continuing to allow voters to register and vote on election day.
- Increased election process integrity through signature verification. Every ballot is returned in an envelope that must be signed by you as the person who voted your ballot. We compare this signature to your voter registration card. Signatures are never verified in polling place elections.
- Increased voter turnout. Since 1998 Montana has always ranked behind both Oregon and Washington since they moved to mail ballot elections. Prior to their movement to mail ballot elections, Montana consistently had a higher voter turnout.
- Time for voter to make well-informed decisions and ask questions. In polling place elections, some voters feel "rushed" into voting for candidates or issues of which they may be ill-informed. With mail ballot elections they have the time and opportunity to make well informed decisions.
- No worry about missing an election. The ballot for each election would automatically be mailed to you. With all of our busy schedules, it is so easy to miss out on voting. Ballots are not forwarded.

A few interesting items from an Oregon mail ballot study include:

- Overall Oregonians prefer voting by mail over voting at the polling place 80.9 percent to 19.1 percent.
- The three categories of employment status who most favor voting by mail are homemakers (93.3 percent), disabled (89.3 percent) and retired (85.5 percent)
- The two age groups who most favor voting by mail are 18- to 25-year-olds (86.7 percent) and 65+ years old (86 percent).
- Rural voters favor mail ballot more than urban (81.3 percent to 80.2 percent).
- The three categories of income that most favor voting by mail are the three lowest categories, less than \$18,000 (81.1 percent), \$18,000 - \$25,000 (84.4 percent) and \$26,000 - \$40,000 (83.7 percent).

Counties currently run three elections at the same time. Those who have chosen to receive their ballot by mail, those who register and vote the same day (even on election day) and then the election at the polling place. It is not sustainable for counties to continue to carry out elections in triplicate.

Please vote for SB 394 – to give counties the option.